

May 2, 2008 - Five Years, Two Words, No Letup

The Washington-Post

www.washingtonpost.com/

Five Years, Two Words, No Letup

By Dana Milbank

Friday, May 2, 2008; A03

By tradition, the proper gift for a fifth anniversary is something made of wood. Jack Murtha must know this, for in observing the fifth anniversary yesterday of President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, he gave the president a rhetorical two-by-four to the head.

"Five years ago today, President Bush addressed our nation and the world from the USS Abraham Lincoln only 42 days after he ordered the invasion of Iraq; he declared 'Mission Accomplished,' " the Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania declared at the liberal Center for American Progress. "One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-seven days later, the U.S. occupation of Iraq continues and our mission remains undefined."

Murtha -- ticking off statistics about doom and misery in Iraq -- couldn't help adding in a sly reference to the flight suit Bush wore that day for his aircraft-carrier- landing stunt. "I was going to wear my field uniform today, but I decided it didn't fit," the bulky Vietnam veteran said. "It shrunk."

For the Bush White House, May Day has become one of the least favorite spots on the calendar -- a time to remember when the president appeared in 2003 aboard the carrier, his flight suit hugging all the right places, to proclaim victory in "the battle of Iraq" underneath a huge "Mission Accomplished" banner.

Now, after half a trillion dollars and the deaths of 4,000 troops and tens of thousands of Iraqis, the president's spin doctors have waved the white flag of surrender over the USS Abraham Lincoln episode. "President Bush is well aware that the banner should have been much more specific, and said mission accomplished for these sailors who are on this ship on their mission," White House press secretary Dana Perino told reporters this week.

That excuse didn't pass the laugh test yesterday morning, when a CNN reporter asked Murtha about it. Murtha shook his head and gave a disgusted sigh as audience members chuckled. "It's almost beyond my belief that they would think anybody would believe that," he finally said. "I'm sure the White House didn't tell [her] to say that," he added, charitably. "I'm sure that was offhand."

For the White House, the fifth-anniversary festivities were just beginning.

Minutes after Murtha finished, Senate Democrats assembled in the Capitol for their own celebration. "Five years ago today, President Bush made an outrageous claim, a claim that has become the symbol of his incompetence and the failure in Iraq," crowed Sen. Frank Lautenberg (N.J.).

As every Democratic lawmaker and his or her uncle issued a press release, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid went to the floor. "Five years ago today, on the deck of an aircraft carrier, returning from the Middle East, America and the world bore witness to perhaps the greatest act of hubris that our nation has ever seen in wartime," Reid said, mocking the president, "resplendent in a flight suit, landing theatrically in a fighter jet."

Even John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, piled on. "I thought it was wrong at the time," he said -- an effective tactic until the Democrats dug up footage of him from 2003 supporting the Mission Accomplished message.

The White House pushed back with weapons of mass distraction. It issued a presidential proclamation declaring "Law Day U.S.A., 2008." Bush observed the National Day of Prayer in the East Room with a speech that shrewdly omitted any mention of the word "Iraq." When those two actions failed to make a dent in the Mission Accomplished coverage, the White House sent out an update announcing that the president would make a statement -- on food aid.

But there was no escaping the anniversary. Those looking out of the north windows of the White House yesterday morning likely would have seen a demonstration organized on Pennsylvania Avenue where antiwar protesters unfurled a 50-foot replica of the Mission Accomplished banner. Alternatively, White House officials could have turned on cable news and seen the latest MoveOn.org ad showing candles on a cake with the "Mission Accomplished" banner in icing.

One by one, Democratic lawmakers took their free shots. Reid's office issued a point-by-point report titled "Five Years On, the Mission Is Not Accomplished." House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel even tied "Mission Accomplished" to Bush's ill-advised opposition, as a baseball-team owner, to the wild-card rule expanding playoff eligibility. He predicted that "once again George Bush's record and America's reputation will go down in flames."

"We have certainly paid a price for not being more specific on that banner," Perino lamented Wednesday. "And I recognize that the media is going to play this up again tomorrow, as they do every single year."

Perino was clever enough to skip yesterday's briefing, leaving her deputy, Tony Fratto, to handle the predictable question: "Given the inevitable attention on this day and what the president said five years ago on the Lincoln, is there any reason the White House didn't schedule an event for the president to talk about it a lot on his terms? It sort of gives the impression you want this anniversary to pass as quickly as possible."

"What we're focused on," Fratto answered gamely, "is what we're doing now to make sure that mission continues to show success."

Mission Still Accomplished? That doesn't quite work. But give Fratto credit: As a PR matter, handling the Mission Accomplished anniversary is near unto a Mission Impossible.